



RESEARCH PAPER

Women Protection Laws in Pakistan: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The article examines Pakistan's laws addressing women's protection from gender-based violence and their effectiveness, highlighting challenges such as economic dependency, cultural and societal outlooks, weak enforcement, and unreported instances of violence. Patriarchal trends make traditional judicial bodies difficult to apply statute-based rights, and women lack sufficient protection due to lack of support networks, legal challenges, and institutional resistance. The paper proposes a multi-dimensional approach to women's protection law improvement, including general legal reforms, expert training for policemen and court functionaries, enhancement of victim support systems, and public awareness campaigns. Further research supports harmonizing the formal legal system with traditional judicial systems and economic empowerment for women to comply with national laws. Despite progress, the system still hinders the proper implementation of legislative frameworks for women's security. The article addresses these issues by building a strong, accessible, and conducive legal and social framework for the peaceful existence of women without violence, prejudice, or cruelty.

KEYWORDS Cultural Norms, Gender-Based Violence, Law Enforcement, Legal Reforms, Victim Support Systems, Women's Protection Laws

Introduction

It is of great importance to establish a fair and just society by laws protecting women. Defense of rights, safety, and further improvement for enhancing gender equality are rendered achievable through these laws. These laws are not only needed by Pakistan's legislation but, more appropriately, morally to empower the women and provide them with a safe environment where they can thrive without experiencing violence or judgement.

In Pakistan, women still face many problems, including discrimination by society, work-place harassment, and domestic abuse. Even the legislative efforts combined with constitutional amendments cannot be operationalized due to structural barriers along with deeply instilled patriarchal ideologies. The law's promises made and the practice in the fields are thus diametrically opposing.

The Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act of 2010 and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act of 2012 are some examples of legislative frameworks created by the Pakistani government in the years passed. The policies show that there is acknowledgment towards women's issues. Yet there are huge deterrents through irregular enforcement, insufficient knowledge, and social resistance. All these issues require solution to address the broader issues of equality and social justice. It looks into the laws, identifies impediments, and reviews structural flaws and indicates what it will take to make the legal protections in sync with the reality facing women. What is required now is workable solutions on top of these regulations toward the protection of women's rights.

Literature Review

Pakistani women have been actively involved in national development initiatives

and fought for women's empowerment. The Muslim Family Law Ordinance 1961 was a significant step towards women's rights. However, discriminatory laws during the Zia government negatively impacted women's standing. Women's groups protested against the Hudood Laws and called for their repeal. The "golden age" of women's empowerment legislation began with the Women Protection Act of 2006. Despite legislative change, women still face criminal violations like workplace bullying, rape threats, and acid throwing (Muneer, 2017).

Gender equality and the elimination of violence against women are now important priorities in the global development agenda. Pakistan has enacted new laws on occasion to protect women's safety and security across the country, especially in the different regions. The study looked at pro-women and pro-girl laws in Sindh provinces to find barriers to their implementation. The primary barriers found were structural barriers at the judicial, police, and prosecution levels. Additionally, the culturally normative frameborders and political factions of society (Noreen, & Musarrat, 2013).

Finding a consensus on the role of women in Pakistani society has been a hurdle to the state's efforts to define women's rights. Therefore, the history of laws affecting women's rights and liberties in Pakistan is a complicated pattern of victories and setbacks. A number of factors, most notably the international perception of Pakistan following the 1999 coup by General Pervez Musharraf, improved the status of women's rights, which had been severely curtailed by General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization campaign. At this period, the most important change to women's rights was the 2006 revision to the Hudood Laws, which resulted in the Protection and Rights of Women Act (Zubair, Haider, & Khattak, 2023).

Numerous important legislation that continue Musharraf's progress toward women's liberation have been passed by the People's Party administration. These new regulations focus on sexual harassment at work, acid throwing, and anti-women's conduct. Additionally, a better rating was given to the National Commission on the Status of Women. Nevertheless, in order to solve enduring problems like human trafficking and women's sovereignty over inherited land, new legislation is needed. To achieve lasting progress on these and other issues impacting Pakistani women's legal status, the government must devise solutions that will benefit women in the country and promote consensus among Pakistanis on the most pragmatic and successful ways to advance women's rights globally while adhering to Islamic principles (Weiss, 2012).

Determine whether there is a relationship between the development of women's involvement in Pakistani official political forums and the laws that have been developed to influence women's status in the nation as a result of these forums. A comparative assessment and analysis of women's involvement in legislative forums throughout time periods and the kind of legislation enacted during these times form the basis of the argument. It makes the case that Pakistan's political history is positively correlated with the rise in women's political and legislative involvement as well as the adoption of legislation protecting women (Muzaffar, & Choudhary, 2017; Syed, Taba & Afzal, 2013).

Pakistani women's rights have dominated national and international debates for a long time. Despite significant legislative advancements like the Protection of Women from Violence Act (2016) and the Anti-Rape Ordinance (2020), Pakistani women continue to face significant barriers to equality and justice. Pakistani laws concerning women's rights, highlighting the challenges and potential solutions to promote gender equality and women's security. Tackling problems such cultural and societal standards, inadequate legal execution and enforcement, and a lack of awareness and education on women's rights. It also makes recommendations on how to make Pakistan's laws safeguarding women's rights more effective. By addressing these issues, Pakistan might move closer to a more equitable society where the freedoms of women are fully recognized and implemented

Low levels of political engagement, empowerment, and education are some of the factors contributing to the high rate of domestic violence in Pakistan. Alcoholism, poverty, dowry systems, repressed autonomy, and incorrect interpretations of religious, traditional, and cultural values are some of the factors that lead to violence. highlights how important it is to acknowledge this problem, improve health and educational resources, and create comprehensive legislation that prohibits alcohol and dowry abuse. Additionally, it urges prosecution against such abuses in low-income nations like Pakistan and stakeholder participation (Ali &khan, 2007).

Women's fundamental rights are gravely violated by sexual harassment, which prevents them from thriving in both the workplace and society. Although Pakistan's current legislative frameworks attempt to address this issue, it is unclear if they adequately address the extent of discrimination and sexual harassment. Social hurdles, ignorance, and reluctance to disclose occurrences are some of the major obstacles that many women have while trying to obtain justice. Many people are unclear about what exactly qualifies as a violation since the phrase "sexual harassment" itself is still vague. Because workplaces frequently lack thorough regulations and training, it can be challenging for victims to report harassment or for employers to take appropriate action.

To guarantee greater enforcement, more precise definitions, and more robust protections for women, legal reforms are required. Getting society to embrace these changes is essential to addressing the pervasive problem of harassment. It is imperative that laws be strengthened, workplace actions be improved, and cultural barriers that keep women from claiming their rights be addressed (Deeba, 2021).

When it comes to marriage, Pakistani women's legal rights and their practical capacity to use those rights diverge significantly. Despite having the legal right to select their partners or dissolve a marriage, women in the nation frequently experience stigmatization, violence, and alienation from their families when they try to use these rights. The conflict between *de jure* (legal) and *de facto* (real-life) rights is made clear by these difficulties. Many women comment on a rising desire for control over their own personal life, and for self-determination within their relationships (Muzaffar, Yaseen & Ahmad, 2018).

In Pakistan, gender roles and conventional norms are generally linked with the erosion of women's autonomy because they do not have a solid voice in matters of their rights. Strengthening legal safeguards and publicizing the awareness concerning women's legal and human rights is crucial to protect women's autonomy, to reduce social shame, and ultimately to raise the status of women in the family and society (Critelli,2012).

Involvement of the judiciary in the solution to gender-based violence and women's rights in Pakistan They therefore argue that the legal justice system in most instances fails to ensure that women receive expedient justice well within time, especially as far as sexual abuse and domestic violence are concerned. This failure remains mainly due to factors arising from gender bias leading to long-case arrears, insufficient skilled judges, and delays in procedures within the court. The authors of the article advise that a special family court, comprising of specially trained gender-sensitive judges handling such cases, will be well equipped to address special gender-based violence issues and expedite the justice system (Mumtaz, & Bhatti, 2020).

Importance of victim support networks, which are necessary in the struggle against gender-based violence, like shelters, legal help programs, and psychiatric treatment. The authors argue that Pakistan has been able to achieve quite a bit in passing legislation in favor of women but that the existing setup fails to provide proper support structures to remove victims from unsafe conditions, particularly in the rural areas. They recommend the shelters and services to be available to every class of woman by calling for increased governmental funding into them. The research further states that reintegration into society requires

rehabilitative services which are all-round, focusing on the psychological and emotional effects of abuse (Shah, & Rahman, 2022).

These socio-cultural factors, particularly in rural areas, are major hurdles to passing law-deeds for women in Pakistan. Patriarchal beliefs and cultural practices are still prevalent, which curtail women's freedom and impact public perceptions of violence against women. Women from rural areas have many additional barriers such as limited access to education, economic dependence, and social norms restricting their freedom. All these factors deter abused women from approaching the legal system for reporting cases and filing actions. This report proposes intervention programs for educating men and women about women's rights and gender equality as an intervention measure for long-lasting transformation. Among others, Khan and Rehman suggest community-based approaches through which such detrimental cultures can be reversed while at the same time increase legal awareness such as sensitization by neighborhood leaders and influencers (Khan, & Rehman, 2019).

The literature indicates that there is a significant gap between the actual implementation of women's protection laws and their enactment in Pakistan, as has been shown by various studies. Studies consistently demonstrate that prevalent issues include cultural opposition, ineffective enforcement of laws, underreporting of gender-based violence, lack of economic resources for women, and restricted access to victim support services. Also, the proper legal system and traditional justice systems conflict frequently, which leads to adverse actions. Academics accept the demand for broader reforms including better victim support systems, gender-sensitive training for law enforcement agencies, public awareness campaigns, and legal reforms.

Both progress and challenges in the advancement of women's protection legislation have characterized Pakistan's history. The journey began with the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan, which under Article 25 ensured equality for all citizens under Article 34 it promoted the active participation of women in all aspects of national life (Government of Pakistan, 1973). Although these clauses established the framework for defending women's rights, their implementation has been inconsistent.

The Law of Evidence cut the weight of a woman's evidence in some court cases to half that of a man in 1984, which prompted discussions and calls for change (Human Rights Watch, 2016). With the Women's Protection Act of 2006, which modified the Hudood Ordinances, significant advancements were made. In order to facilitate victims' access to justice, this law eliminated the need for four male witnesses and relocated rape cases to civil courts (The Women's Protection Act, 2006).

More legislation to combat violence against women has been introduced over time. While the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2011) established severe penalties for acid attacks, a prevalent form of violence against women, the Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2010) offered protections against workplace harassment (United Nations Women, 2011).

To uphold Islamic law, the Hudood Ordinances were established in 1979, under the leadership of General Zia-ul-Haq. They were widely condemned for its effects on women, even though their goal was to bring legislation into line with Christian beliefs. Rape victims, for instance, needed the testimony of four male witnesses to support their claims; otherwise, they risked being accused of adultery (Khan, 2017). This led to a significant deal of pain and deterred many women from reporting crimes.

The Punjab government failed to protect women and girls from abuses like rape, murder, acid attacks, domestic violence, and forced marriages. A law was passed in March to punish child marriage arrangers but did not raise marriage age to 18 in line with

international standards. The Council of Islamic Ideology denounced the reform. Due to warnings over mosque loudspeakers and polling site guards, women in Lower Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were not allowed to vote in May. According to news accounts, the few ladies who tried to vote were barred by men with batons ((Human Rights Watch, 2016).

The Zainab Alert, Response, and Recovery Act (2020) was introduced to address child abduction and abuse cases, focusing on protecting young girls. Despite advancements, challenges like traditional cultural norms, societal resistance, and weak law enforcement limit the law's impact. Despite progress in women's protection laws in Pakistan, more work is needed for justice and equality.

Legal Framework for Women's Protection in Pakistan:

Pakistan's legal framework that protects women from violence-based discrimination has improved over time. These laws are intended to protect women's rights in the public as well as private domain, but there are often institutional, cultural, and societal determinants that affect the enforcement of these laws.

Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010):

In order to create a safe working environment for women, Pakistan enacted the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) which is considered to be a groundbreaking law (Government of Pakistan, 2010). Under the law, any gesture such as words or actions that are calculated but not welcomed, that are sexy and request for sexual favors, or other sexual jokes around someone's sexuality that are unpleasant or make a workplace hostile or distracting is considered as harassment. It is suitable for all workplaces, including educational bodies, non-governmental organizations, private and public firms, and informal sectors. As per the law, every company is obliged to form an internal assessment standing committee of three members and at least one woman to investigate allegations of harassment.

If necessary, if further actions are not taken or the response given to the complainant does not satisfy them, an appeal to a federal or provincial ombudsperson may be appropriate. Fines or reprimand as well as termination from the military are some of the penalties for offenders.

It was also decided, as a part of the Act, that it is the responsibility of the companies to get employees sensitized and post a code of conduct in the premises so as to provide preventive measures (Government of Pakistan, 2010). Even with its progressive framework, there are still issues with its application. Cultural barriers, poor knowledge and the problem of law enforcement in casual work are a few of these. Many conservative and rural women feel ashamed and fear reprisals, and hence do not report harassment.

Nevertheless, the Act has significantly enhanced consciousness regarding workplace harassment and provided women, especially in urban centers, with a platform to seek redress. This initiative is the bone of contention in the most crucial development of its kind to ensure safer and more inclusive workplaces in Pakistan.

The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2011)

Besides, Acid Control and Acid Crimes Prevention Act (2011) is one of the laws regulating acid attacks, mostly towards women, in Pakistan. This law disallows minimum of 14 years in prison and a fine of up to 1 million PKR as punishment for acid violence, in addition to making acid violence a crime. It forbids the sale of acid to avoid its misuse (Government of Pakistan, 2011). This may be a step closer to the long-awaited affirmative actions towards safeguarding women and bringing accountability for the violations into the

open; however, the enforcement of this legislation still remains to be a challenge. The victims are generally deprived of medical, financial, or emotional support and continue to be oblivious to the issue. Further, there are insufficient measures as regards compliance with the laws governing the sale of acid. However, in all these aspects, there is testimony to a commitment on the part of the government in the form of laws, towards prevention of such crimes and formal protection into safety of women against such crimes.

The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act (2012)

They are also obligatory for up to the length of October 2023. One significant law of Pakistan is the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, and this is meant to cover all forms of domestic violence, including economic, sexual, psychological, and physical violence, among other forms. Significantly, the law entitled women to protection orders which could be utilized as legal protection and safe havens. A protection order may mean resettlement or restraining an abuser from contacting the victim, among others. It also provides swift emergency relief including financial assistance, access to medical services, and a place of safety in addition it guarantees accelerated proceedings and immediate action of law enforcement on complaints.

Great strides have been made; however, the measures to put an end to domestic abuse face the number of problematic issues. First, entrenched cultural patterns and societal beliefs hold domestic violence as a private matter that discourages victims from reporting incidents to the relevant authorities. Further, law enforcement agencies' personnel lack adequate training on the issue, and mostly it is rural areas where this has occurred. Women dare not seek justice because most of them come from an economically weak background and bear the fear of retaliation. Lack of adequate budgets for shelters and legal aid complements the enforcement of law on domestic violence. These are the impediments that must get cleared for victims to access the necessary support and protection, thus setting the stage for other developments in the society against domestic abuse in Pakistan (Ahmed, 2018).

The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Ordinance 2021

The core aim of the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Ordinance, 2021 in Pakistan is to tackle sexual violence and increase the speed of legal procedures concerning known rape cases. It schedules investigations for two months and trials for four months. Furthermore, it establishes Anti-Rape Cells in police stations and includes advanced forensic evidence like DNA testing. It also addresses the establishment of specialized medical boards in order to perform forensic evaluations. Victims also give evidence through video conferencing allowing for their safety and convenience while also keeping them free from any intimidation. In addition, such punishments entail death sentence or life imprisonment for repeat offenders and those producing violence against minors. Specialized courts dealing with rape cases are being set up to hasten legal processes. The check and accountability of this initiative rests with the National Commission for Women. Nonetheless, these may be hampered by logistical issues, resource shortages, and some social taboos that still exist. All these conditions notwithstanding, this ordinance is a landmark and great step forward towards bettering the legal framework and providing a more compassionate caring environment for this type of survivor in Pakistan. Regardless of obstacles like geographical constraints in rural areas, inadequate resources and deep-rooted societal taboos, this ordinance marks a significant step forward in strengthening the country's legal framework and creating a more sympathetic support system for survivors of sexual violence (Khan, 2022).

The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act (2016):

The Act by Punjab provides the Protection of Women Against Violence which was

enacted in 2016 and is a form of legislation that is drafted in Pakistan for the purposes of effectively eliminating violence meted out to women and includes a variety of forms of abuse such as physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and many others. This legislation empowers the victim to seek the protection orders through the court of law. Also, it directs the establishment of women protection centers. Women protection centers will thus be places where women can get accommodation, legal aid, and medical care. It provides guidelines and protocols to be followed in the investigation and prosecution of cases of violence and commands that these are done in a very sensitive and attentive manner by law enforcement agencies, since the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act in Pakistan defines as Making penalties against a perpetrator of violence which would range from fines to imprisonment depending on the severity of the crime committed. The law also wants to sensitize people and sensitize the entire society towards gender balance in all activities and thus requires cooperation from law enforcement, judiciary, and welfare agencies. The Act represents a major step forward in establishing women's safety and gender equity in Pakistan, though there are challenges such as poor resources for the safeguarding facility and delayed legal procedures (Bukhari, 2016).

Main factors affecting implementation of these laws

Many institutional, social, cultural, and legal factors are intertwined to create serious challenges in the effective implementation as well as the impact of women's protection laws in Pakistan. Though many legal frameworks exist to protect women's rights, these barriers hinder further advancement toward equality and protection for women. Major impediments include: Key obstacles include:

Cultural and Societal Norms

Pakistan's patriarchal system, which basically puts women in a subordinate position in the family and society, restricts their independence and authority. Women are, therefore, confined to house chores and are not free to move around, especially in rural areas. Societal norms bound women and continue gender-based violence. Women are blamed for rape, domestic abuse, or harassment and their honor is connected with family reputation. Social ostracism fears stop women from seeking justice. Misinterpretations of religious teachings fuel gender inequality leading to practices like honor killings and child marriage. Traditional justice systems prioritize customary norms over legal frameworks, which enable offenders to avoid punishment and maintain patriarchal dominance.

These deeply inculcated cultural and institutional restrictions, further enforcing social exclusion, compound social pressure to fit into restrictive gender norms and the low representation of women in political and judicial decision-making processes as factors that worsen the difficulties of women. Therefore, dealing with these issues requires a holistic approach that involves altering public perceptions of gender equality, strengthening the application of laws protecting women, and enabling women to question discriminatory practices. (Zuberi & Rizvi, 2020).

Lack of Awareness and Education

The lack of education and knowledge among women and the general public is a major obstacle to the proper application of Pakistan's laws protecting women. Many women do not know their legal rights or the safeguards that the law provides, especially in rural regions. Due to the cultural barriers that prevent women from learning about their rights, this ignorance is worsened due to limited access to education and information. As a result, when women face assault, discrimination, or any other forms of injustice, they cannot recognize or claim their rights most of the time. (Hassan & Ahmad, 2020).

Pakistan's women face widespread illiteracy due to traditional societal norms that

prioritize domestic roles over education. This leaves many uninformed about resources and legal mechanisms, and hinders their ability to report crimes or seek legal recourse. The unawareness of women's rights in society, including men and local authorities, results in the dismissive attitude towards victims and improper handling of cases. Public awareness campaigns are inadequate, especially in remote areas. To address this, female literacy rates must be increased, women's rights education must be integrated into school curricula, and awareness campaigns must be conducted. Women must be empowered with knowledge about their rights and legal protections to advocate and seek justice. It promotes sensitization of law-enforcement and community leaders; this can enhance law-enforcement and create a conducive female-friendly environment.

Weak Law Enforcement and Judicial Support

The law enforcing mechanism of Pakistan is weak and the judicial support it receives. Despite comprehensive laws, women's protection laws are compromised by the inefficiency within the judicial system. For instance, women are kept away from reporting crimes against them because of uncooperative police, lengthy procedures in courts, and some discriminatory attitudes. In law enforcement, the police often have a bad reputation due to their handling of cases about women. Women who experience gender-based violence often suffer from dismissive attitudes and insensitivity from the police or other law enforcement officers as they try to downplay their complaints or act as mediators rather than reporting and prosecuting offenders. Women, in most cases, are prevented from reporting formal cases of assault or harassment mainly because people believe that matters relating to domestic violence and harassment should not be publicly reported (Ali & Khan, 2021). Moreover, the involvement of corruption among police agencies hinders the provision of justice since a criminal may bribe his or her way out.

The Pakistani judicial system is presently marred by slow court processes, cultural biases, and a very low percentage of female judicial representation. Women are affected emotionally and financially by delayed justice, and judges often disregard or trivialize violence cases. Systemic reforms are the need of the hour-educating law enforcement, ensuring accountability for mishandling cases, and maintaining dedicated women's police stations and courts. Judicial training programs and strengthening institutions are also a must for timely and just outcomes. Building trust and empowering women to seek protection and justice under the law is essential.

Economic Dependency

Economic dependency on male family members in Pakistan hinders the protection laws of women, which cannot make independent decisions and obtain justice. This dependency is often associated with abusive relationships and financial insecurity. They do not have access to economic resources, which hampers their ability to take legal action or shift to safer environments. The societal norms and systemic barriers further worsen this problem, as the culture of the society expects women to be caregivers and homemakers. Even when employed, women often occupy low-paying or informal jobs, leaving them financially vulnerable (Ahmed & Rehman, 2021).

Economic dependency weakens women's protection laws, because a woman is hesitant to report crime or seek legal recourse out of fear of losing her financial support. Thus, it becomes a vicious cycle of vulnerability and a way to strengthen patriarchal structures against women. Empowering women through education, skill development, and economic opportunities would address economic dependency. The government programs and NGOs should offer vocational training, microfinance programs, and job opportunities. Economic support systems incorporated into the women protection law will help women come out of dependency and fight for justice.

Political and Institutional Resistance

Women protection laws from such terrible wounds were probably hit hardest by the political and institutional inertia, conservative political factions, religious groups, and traditional power structures. Currently, although considerable progress has been made in legislation, the current political will does not have the required strength to enforce such laws. Conservative politicians prefer not to support women-friendly legislation in rural constituencies for fear of losing their voter base. Religious arguments against laws preventing violence against women are that they oppose the cultural and religious norms (Bari, 2020). This greatly inspired not strong enough enactments that do not touch upon the severest causes of gender-based violence. Proper implementation of laws related to the protection of women would not become a reality in the country because of entrenched institutional resistance and underrepresentation of women in the political and legal system in Pakistan. Government institutions such as law enforcement and judicial agencies, most of which do not capacitate or commit the enforcement of such laws because of bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption as well as gender biases. Such resistance makes women lose hope for getting justice and creates a feeling of mistrust towards the legal system. Institutional reform is further hindered because of the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Political and institutional resistance to achieving sustained advocacy and systemic reforms needs to be overcome in order for women to achieve their rightful place in power. Increased representation of women in leadership will therefore sensitize the policy and law enforcement systems to women protection laws and create a more conducive environment.

Underreporting of Gender-Based Violence

One of the major challenges that Pakistan's laws present for the protection of women is under-reporting. Domestic violence, sexual harassment, and honour killing are just a few examples of the violence that women face in the country, yet only a small minority of their experiences is made known to others. Under-reporting is thought to be caused primarily by cultural, societal, and institutional factors that further dissuade women from approaching the judicial system as well as making victims of such gender-specific violence. Being a victim of gender-based violence is usually stigmatized, often translating into judgments, blame, or ostracism from families and communities. Cultural emphasis on family honour also keeps women from coming forward, particularly in sexual violence cases (Zuberi & Ahmed, 2019).

Barriers to institutions and positions of mistrust in law enforcement and judicial systems cause under-reported violence. Legal processes victimise women, and they are made to feel uncomfortable and unsafe by the absence of representations. This is worse in rural areas where there are limited resources and little knowledge about legal protections, for example, on economic dependence. Economic dependence on abusers can also force women to remain silent, fearing financial insecurity for themselves and their children. The underreporting of gender-based violence calls for a multi-dimensional approach. Public awareness campaigns should desensitize reporting and assist victims. Women's police stations and more female officers in the police force can ensure a safer environment. Law enforcement and judicial officials need to be trained in gender sensitivity. Education, economic opportunities, and legal rights for women can break the cycle of silence and expose all incidents of gender-based violence.

Ineffective Victim Support Systems

Pakistan's victim support systems are ineffective, which hinders the implementation of women's protection laws. Survivors of gender-based violence lack resources and support structures, which creates a systemic gap that discourages crime reporting and perpetuates their vulnerability. The lack of safe shelters and crisis centers further discourages women from seeking help, as they are often limited, poorly resourced, and inaccessible to women in

remote areas. The stigma attached to seeking shelters further discourages women from using these services (Ali & Bano, 2021). Shelters do not often have staff, money, or infrastructure in order to provide comprehensive care: counseling, medical, or legal. Survivors, furthermore, lack skills, finances, and networks necessary for rebuilding their lives. Economic dependency and vocational inadequacy prevent their self-reliance and successful integration into society. Instead, they are sent back into the same types of situations from which they have fled.

Institutional inadequacies in the victim support system limit their effectiveness. Police and judicial officers are sometimes not well trained and insensitive to deal with cases concerning women, and this leads to judgmental attitudes and less effective responses. The response is disjointed because there is a lack of coordination between agencies. This would require a holistic approach such as the expansion of women's shelters and crisis centers, the introduction of vocational training programs, and the development of interagency coordination frameworks. These measures shall ensure accessibility, comprehensive care, and empower survivors so that they can rebuild themselves independently.

Legal Gaps and Ambiguities

The gap and ambiguity of laws concerning women's protection make the women vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Societal attitudes and structural challenges, like giving importance to cultural practices rather than gender equality, cause such issues. This confusion, for instance between the Protection of Women Against Violence Act and workplace harassment laws, creates confusion not only among the victims but also legal practitioners in making an effective pursuit of justice. These issues call for more comprehensive and effective legal frameworks (Hussain & Khan, 2021).

The lack of coordination between the formal and informal justice system in rural and tribal areas is a serious challenge. Traditional justice mechanisms, jirgas and panchayats, often take precedence over the statutory law and are in contrast to the legal protection of women. Legal provisions in the form of laws against emerging trends of gender-based violence like cyber harassment is absent in the legal system, as it fails to adapt to new challenges. Pakistan has made huge strides with laws such as the Prevention from Electronic Crimes Act, but enforcement continues to be limited due to the lack of capacities in law enforcement agencies. Those biases associated within judiciary and law-enforcement agencies often form legal ambiguities. Holistic reform and institutional strengthening are needed to make legal gaps and ambiguities longer legible. There is a need to inconsistently remove, clearly defined provisions, strengthen law enforcement, form principles of gender equality coupled within the informal justice systems as being aligned by the formal laws, and educate the communities.

Traditional Justice Systems

Conventional judicial structures like jirgas and panchayats seriously hinder the application of laws enacted for women's rights in Pakistan. These well-established systems are present parallel to the official legal system in rural and tribal communities. Although they are generally considered affordable and culturally accessible means of conflict settling within these communities, most decisions are starkly against the law and against the rights of women.

One of the major malfunctions of such a conventional legal system is patriarchal norms and values that place the highest premium on community peace over rights. Jirgas and panchayats often deliver decisions that are harmful to women and perpetuate gender inequality. For example, in swara or vani customs, where girls are used as a means of settling family disputes through marriage, women are often used as bargaining tools. These practices are still carried out because of the power and influence of traditional justice

procedures, though they are blatant violations of Pakistani legislation, such as the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act (Ali & Zahid, 2021).

Traditional justice systems in Pakistan, more often than not, deny women decision-making and witnessing powers, and hence perpetuate systemic bias against them. It is an exclusion that also denies them the power to plead their case. These systems also lack formal legal institutions' accessibility in rural areas. Addressing the challenges necessitates an intensification of access and access of formal legal institutions through setting up more courts and legal aid centers, enlightening communities of the provisions for protections in formal laws, among others. This also means integrating customary practices into statutory laws.

Conclusion

Pakistan's women's protection laws have progressed a lot in recognizing women's rights and protecting them from violence and discrimination. However, these laws are ineffective due to cultural, societal, political, and institutional challenges. Cultural norms like patriarchal values and family reputation often normalize violence against women, which makes the victim not report abuse. Economic dependency, especially in rural areas, traps women in abusive relationships and limits their access to justice. A lack of knowledge about legal rights, the legal process, and support services further limits women's access to justice. Corruption and gender bias further delay the legal process, thereby preventing women from seeking justice.

Gender-based violence is underreported. The reasons for this underreporting are mostly due to fear, shame, and lack of trust in the justice system. Social stigma and emotional dependence on abusers discourage victims from reporting crimes. Institutional barriers such as the lack of victim support services and insensitive law enforcement responses also lead to unsatisfactory outcomes. Traditional justice systems, like jirgas and panchayats, promote gender-based violence by supporting patriarchal norms and customary practices. The lack of integration between formal and informal justice systems contributes to the failure of women's protection laws. Legal gaps and ambiguities in laws also contribute to the challenges faced by women. Inconsistent application of laws and the overlap of multiple legal frameworks limit the effectiveness of legal remedies. All this calls for a comprehensive response involving multifaceted actions: legal reforms to achieve an overhaul, train police officers in gender responsiveness; more women's police stations, courts, legal aid centres, increase the women rights awareness level; promote their participation in the economy and provision of economic empowerment such as vocational training, microcredit programs; expanding victims support services.

Addressing the influence of traditional justice systems and integrating them with the legal framework is crucial for a more just society for women. Educating communities about harmful practices and promoting gender equality within traditional communities may help create a more just society. A combination of legal reforms, improved law enforcement, and societal change is the need of the hour.

Recommendations

- **Comprehensive Legal Amendments:** To remove all sorts of ambiguities and loopholes, the existing laws need to be updated and amended. If you want a clear legal clarity, define gender assault, define harassment, and specify which legal crimes fall under these terms. Ensure very harsh punishments for perpetrators and consider the new trends like online harassment.
- **Strengthen accountability:** Fire repetitive user catalogs updating subject matter training for all law enforcement personnel on women's rights and gender-sensitive

policing. Provide systems for accountability by establishment of an independent oversight committee that handles police wrongdoing in cases of gender-based violence.

- **Having functional and specialized courts:** The establishment of women's courts would witness judges being specially trained to deal with cases involving any form of violence against them. Such courts would be provided with various resources ranging from legal assistance to psychological support, in addition to speedy procedures, during such sensitive times.
- **Improving Shelters and Victims Support Systems:** This would include increasing the number of recognized service points offering full services such as medical care, legal advice, and financial recuperation programs especially in rural and remote areas. Internal shelters would focus more on long-term empowerment of survivors than on immediate needs.
- **Educational Campaigns towards Awareness:** Commencing awareness programs focusing on the legal rights of women as well as accessible resources and reporting of sexual assault. Means of awareness-building could be through social media, radio, television, and other community outreach programs to ensure relevant information has the greatest reach, especially in rural areas.
- **Economic Empowerment Programmes:** Setup programs regarding the economic independence of women, right from the giving of micro-loans to facilitating skills-acquisition courses and vocational training. Empowered women are less likely to fall into abusive situations as they can take charge and safeguard their means of survival themselves.
- **Overcome Political and Institutional Resistance:** Political leaders can be convinced to take a strong stance on women's protection laws by publicly committing to give gender equality top priority and actively supporting relevant legislation. Political parties must also be urged to give women's problems top priority in their agendas.
- **Make it easier for the official and informal justice systems to coordinate:** While addressing the issue of gender violence, establish coordination between formal legal institutions and informal justice systems. Ensure, while adhering to cultural contexts, that informal institutions are parallel to the legal rights of women in the country. Such an approach will eradicate harmful practices such as honor killings and swara.
- **Put Data-Driven Policy Making into Practice:** Create a consolidated national database that monitors the incidence, reporting, and results of cases to enhance the gathering of data on gender-based violence. This information may be used to inform better policy decisions and track advancements in the fight against violence against women.
- **Promote Gender-Responsive Media Representation:** Educate the public on the social, legal, and economic consequences of gender-based violence while simultaneously challenging the media to portray women in stronger and more positive roles. Media institutions should also be educated on how to report delicately on issues such as domestic violence without victim-blaming.

These updated suggestions center on doable steps to address the fundamental issues with Pakistan's laws that protect women. These solutions can be used to promote a more inclusive and encouraging environment for women by trying to address the cultural and legal elements that lead to the implementation gaps.

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